

Rethinking wayfinding: How to build a system that reduces stress and reflects your brand

In this document, you'll learn how to make sense of your wayfinding challenges and take the first steps towards building a wayfinding system that minimizes confusion, reduces operational friction, and reflects your brand's values. We'll explore common issues, real-life transition points, and the emotional journey patients take long before they reach your signage.

A photograph of a long, brightly lit hospital corridor. The corridor has a white ceiling with recessed lighting and a light-colored floor. On the left wall, there are several framed pictures and a large blue wayfinding sign. On the right wall, there are more framed pictures and a large blue wayfinding sign. The corridor leads to a bright area at the end, possibly an entrance or a large room. The overall atmosphere is clean and professional.

BrandActive

Wayfinding isn't just about getting there. It's about feeling considered.

In healthcare, every moment counts and that includes the time before anyone walks through your doors. Wayfinding doesn't begin at the first sign. It begins the moment someone books an appointment, navigates a parking lot, or wonders, "Am I even in the right building?"

Why it matters

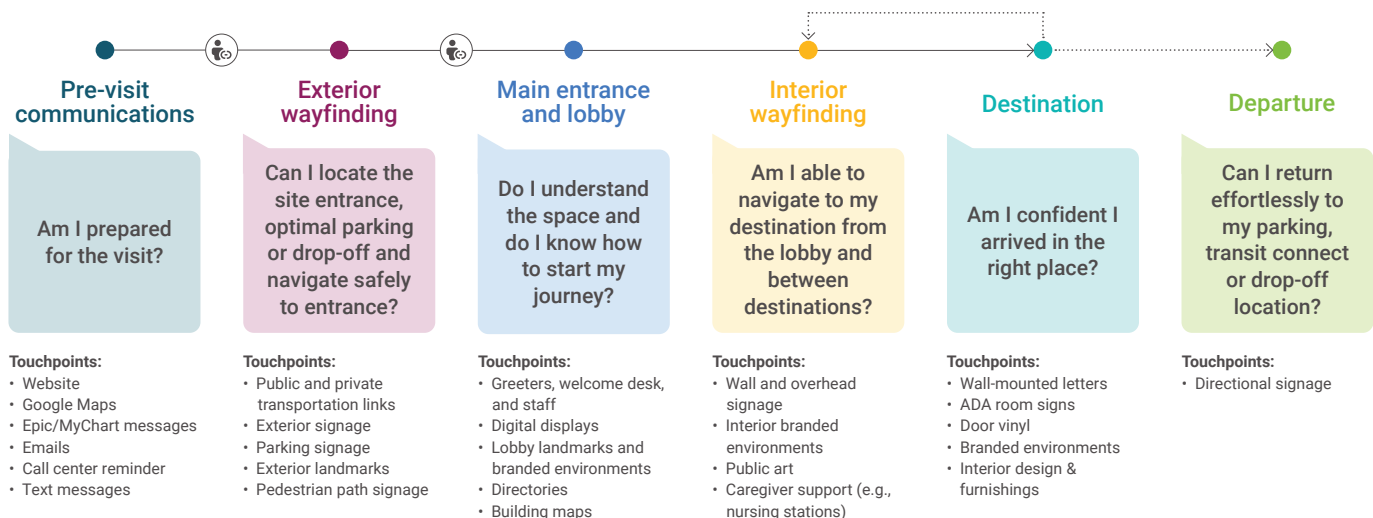
Left unaddressed, poor wayfinding results in more than just confusion. It leads to:

- Missed or delayed appointments
- Increased strain on staff
- Operational inefficiencies
- Lower satisfaction scores

These aren't signage problems. They're system problems.

Walk the patient journey.

From pre-visit communication to departure, people encounter multiple "transition points" where clarity breaks down:



Transition points are when consumers experience a switch in the communication medium (e.g., from car GPS to following signage as a pedestrian.) During transition points there needs to be a clear link in nomenclature and hierarchy across mediums.



Speak to the people who experience your system everyday.

Use this approach to gather focused feedback from multiple perspectives including clinical teams, front-line staff, facilities, and patients.

	Pre-visit	Site arrival an exterior wayfinding	Main entrance and lobby	Interior wayfinding	Destinations	Departure
Journey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schedule appointment Plan a visit Transit to location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transit arrival Parking Transition to entrance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building arrival/entrance Reception/Registration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition to destination and between destinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrive at destination Waiting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition from destination to main pathway, lobby, parking
Virtual interview questions						
Experience	<p>What communications do patients receive before arrival? What steps are included in it?</p> <p>What do you think is missing from pre-visit communications that would make it easier for patients to find their appointments?</p>	<p>How are lots organized between staff and visitor parking?</p> <p>Are there any routes or areas with congestion? Any security or road planning initiatives underway?</p>	<p>Are there specific entrances patients and visitors are directed to for different services?</p> <p>What happens upon arrival?</p>	<p>How do people navigate their journey to their destination?</p> <p>What are some challenging areas to navigate at the location?</p>	<p>What are the major destinations patients and visitors are looking for?</p> <p>What is the waiting area process and what information is provided within waiting areas?</p>	<p>Are patients and visitors able to find their car or transit link after their appointment?</p>
In-person interview questions						
Experience	<p>What communications do patients receive before arrival?</p> <p>What tools and information do patients and visitors have access to?</p>	<p>What do you think can be improved in the parking and drop-off experience?</p> <p>How are visitors arriving on-site (i.e., drop-off, parking, transit)</p>	<p>Does everyone come through the main entrance?</p> <p>Do patients/visitors stop at the registration desk, or go directly to their destinations?</p>	<p>How do people navigate their journey to their destination?</p> <p>Once visitors are on their way, how many of them make it on their own vs. stopping staff to ask for directions?</p>	<p>What are the major destinations patients and visitors are looking for?</p> <p>Are visitors typically coming for one appointment or multiple?</p>	<p>Are patients and visitors able to find their car or transit link after their appointment?</p> <p>Is there anything staff does to support them in this?</p>

The best wayfinding systems do more than direct. They reassure.

When people are stressed, sick, or in unfamiliar territory, even small gaps in guidance become big stressors. Good wayfinding helps people feel not just informed, but seen.

Think in three feelings

Your wayfinding approach should help people feel:

- 1 **Oriented** – “I understand where I am”
- 2 **Directed** – “I know my next step”
- 3 **Assured** – “I feel confident I’ll get there”

These three outcomes create a more inclusive, human-centered experience.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Do our signs match what people see in emails, maps, and digital instructions?
- Are we using language that’s intuitive for first-time visitors?
- Where are people switching mediums (e.g. car > signage > staff) and losing their sense of direction?

Feeling		What patient and visitors might say and do	What we might observe in our site walk
Oriented	Ability to understand the overall space, their journey within it, and current position throughout the duration of their journey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Am I in the imaging building?• I didn’t realize it was such a long walk!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No preview of the journey or steps provided in pre-visit communications• No building map• When a visitor or patient only knows their service and room number
	Ability to know their next step at every decision point throughout their journey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask staff members for direction in the hallway• I’m lost	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decision points with no signage• Inconsistent messaging between signs
Assured	Ability to feel confident they are taking the right steps throughout the duration of their journey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Am I in the right place?• Can I walk in this hallway?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Missing room signs• Underwhelming lobby spaces• Long hallways that feel remote/empty• Closed doors mid-journey

Start with real insights. Then build a system that works.

Before redesigning signs or naming buildings, it's important to understand how people currently move through your space and where they get stuck. For example, we worked with a client who was confident their signage was intuitive, until patient interviews revealed confusion navigating between outpatient services and labs.

What looked clear on a floorplan didn't align with how people moved or interpreted the space. Speaking with patients, staff and other stakeholders can help you uncover:

- Patterns of confusion or frustration
- Gaps between digital and physical guidance
- Language that excludes or overwhelms
- Operational pain points that signage alone can't fix



Goal

Build a grounded understanding of how wayfinding currently works (and doesn't) across your environment.



Impact

Provide baseline knowledge, identifies existing gaps, and ensures the new strategy builds upon or refines prior work rather than duplicating efforts.

We don't just fix what's broken. We build what's missing.

We're the only firm that takes a system-wide approach, starting from the very beginning of your brand experience. We lead wayfinding programs that break down silos, manage budgets responsibly, and deliver clarity at scale, powered by deep implementation expertise.

Ready to make wayfinding work for everyone who walks through your doors? Let's talk about how to take the next steps.



brandactive.com



(720) 446-5632